

Leadership Barometer 149 Smart Pills **Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD**



One of my leadership students shared an observation that led to the concept of “smart” pills for leaders. She said that some of the decisions the leaders in her organization make are not smart. These decisions reflect a misunderstanding of their impact. The leaders end up doing things that are at cross purposes to what they want to accomplish.

I told the student to buy some "smart" pills for the leaders to take. The pills will let them know when they do things that take them in the wrong direction. Then I realized that I already had discovered the "smart" pill several years ago. I have taught leaders how to administer this magic potion for quite a while.

Determine the impact ahead of time

Allow leaders to determine the impact of their decisions on the organization at the time they make those decisions. This knowledge will reduce the number of wrong-headed actions.

Picture a leader of 90 individuals. There are 90 people who can tell her the truth about the impact of poor decisions while they are under discussion. They would gladly do this if the leader had created the right environment. People need to know it is safe to challenge an idea generated in the leader’s mind. How would a leader go about creating such an environment?

Create a safe environment

A smart leader makes people glad when they tell her things she was really not eager to hear. Then those people will eventually learn it is safe to do it. They have the freedom to level with the leader when she is contemplating something they feel is really dumb.

It does not mean that all dumb things the leader wants to do need to get squashed. It simply means that if the leader establishes a safe culture, she will be told. She will know in advance that a specific decision might not be smart.

It depends on perspective

Sometimes, due to a leader's perspective, what may seem dumb to underlings may be the smart thing to do. In this case, the leader needs to educate the doubting underling on why the decision does make sense.

Here is an eight-step formula that constitutes a "smart" pill.

- 1. Let people know in advance the decisions you are contemplating, and state your likely action.**
- 2. Invite dialog, either public or private. People should feel free to express their opinions about the outcomes.**
- 3. Treat people like adults, and listen to them carefully when they express concerns.**
- 4. Factor their thoughts into your final decision process. This does not mean you always reverse your decision but do consciously consider the input.**
- 5. Make your final decision about the issue and announce it.**
- 6. State that there were several opinions considered when making your decision.**
- 7. Thank people for sharing their thoughts in a mature way.**
- 8. Ask for everyone's help to implement your decision whether or not they fully agree with it.**

Of course, it is important for people to share their concerns with the leader in a proper way at the proper time. Calling her a jerk in a staff meeting would not qualify as helpful information and would be a problem.

Encourage people to speak up, but coach them on how and when to do it effectively. Often this means encouraging people to give their concerns in private. Have a helpful intent for the organization rather than an effort to embarrass the boss.

The leader will still make some dumb decisions, but they will be fewer, and be made recognizing the risks. Also, realize that history may reveal some decisions thought to be dumb at the time to be actually brilliant.

Understanding the risks allows some mitigating actions to remove much of the sting of making risky decisions. The action here is incumbent on the leader. Praise people when they speak truth, even if it flies in the face of what the leader wants to do. People become open and more willing to confront the leader when her judgment seems wrong.

Look for consistency but not perfection

A leader needs to be consistent with this philosophy, although no one can be 100%. That would be impossible. Once in a while, any leader will push back on some unwanted "reality" statements.

Most leaders are capable of making people who challenge them happy about it only a tiny fraction of the time. Figure about 5%. If we increase the odds to something like 80%, people will be more comfortable pointing out a potential blooper. That is enough momentum to change the culture.

Recognize that making people glad they brought up a concern does not always mean a leader must acquiesce. All that is required is for the leader to treat the individual as someone with important information. Listen to the person carefully, and consider the veracity of the input. Honestly take the concern into account in deciding what to do.

Sometimes the leader will go ahead with the original action, but she will now understand the potential ramifications better. By sincerely thanking the person, the leader makes that individual happy she brought it up. Other people will take the risk in the future. That action changes everything, and the leader now has an effective "smart" pill.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book *Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind*, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

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